

Some Experiences of Lord Syfret.

BY ARABELLA KENEALY.

II.—IN A TERRIBLE GRIP.

ILLUSTRATED BY R. SAVAGE.



I HAD taken a house at Dover. I detest publicity, and a case I had been dipping into threatened to come to trial, in which event I should inevitably find my name figuring in the papers. Therefore I conveyed myself and my effects to the coast, and had my yacht in readiness so that a wire from my lawyer should give me some sea-miles start of the person charged with the serving of my subpoena. I slept at Dover, going down most days by the five o'clock express. About half-an-hour out from town I observed a strange old tumble-down house standing a little distance from the railway, a house noticeable for being a curious graft of villa upon farm-house. This house had impressed itself on the outer tablets of my consciousness for some days, perhaps, before it struck deep enough to focuss my attention. I know this by the circumstance that one day it remained in my memory with the clear and sharp intensity of something I had been acquainted with for years. I even found that my outer consciousness had arrived at the conclusion that the house belonged to an artist. There was a long low room built out from it, a room with complicated blinds and a large top-light—a studio to all appearance. Then I asked myself why had the house impressed me and what was my impression? As I have said, I have an instinct for a house with a history; but, unfortunately, imagination and this instinct occasionally become confused. This was a house calculated by its quaint construction to

excite the fancy. Fancy alone might be at work.

As I neared it next morning I examined it attentively. Certainly it was a charming old house, and the garden a tingle of perfume and colour. A hurried glance as we rushed past showed me the interior of the studio. There were no pictures nor sign of artistic properties. Not even an easel. Indeed, the only thing in the room was an immense chair, a chair that caught and held my attention. It stood on a platform raised from the ground. It was fitted with levers and flanges and screws of every conceivable form and shape. I put my head out of window, staring back at it. It looked like some horrible instrument of mediæval torture. Before it had passed from view I burst out laughing. Truly, my imagination was at ferment. The chair was an instrument of torture without question, but a modern one. It was a dentist's chair! Not such a dentist's chair as I had ever seen, but manifestly a dentist's chair. The annex was, then, no artist's studio, but a dentist's surgery. I decided in the evening that the dentist had retired, and had preserved this relic of his stock-in-trade possibly from some sentiment of professional pride, for the house stood a mile at least from any other houses, and these were a mere score of squalid cottages. Assuredly there was no scope for professional practice.

A man stood out on the lawn as we passed. If he were the dentist he was young to retire—young, and yet old. His hair was grey: he was thin to emaciation. He stood scanning the train with a wild gaze. He looked like a man who had sustained some mental shock. This impression was increased by the fact that a sudden shriek from the engine at the moment of passing set

his face contorting. Then he clapped his hands spasmodically over his ears, and turning, shot into the house, his coat-tails flying.

"My good sir," I reflected, "before you chose a dwelling within sixty yards of a railway you should have discovered that your nerves were not equal to the shriek of a locomotive."

A day later I was interested to see



"GOING DOWN BY THE EXPRESS"

that the dentist had a patient. The torture-chair was occupied. I could not make out much of the occupant, and strangely enough the dentist was not visible. Neither were there to be seen the table set with picks and files, nor the drill nor any of those other contrivances for anticipating the tortures of the lost, wherein the dental mind is so prolific. As we glided opposite I got a better view. The man lay back in the chair motionless and gagged, with such a look of horror in his starting eyes as was absolutely appalling. His face was livid, his hands purple and patched with white about the knuckles, as though he were straining every effort for composure.

It was evident he was undergoing mental torture of the extremest kind. Yet he lay back motionless—the convulsions of his features being the only evidence of muscular activity about him. I wondered, rather contemptuously—for after all the tortures of dentistry are not more than a man may bear—I wondered, if he felt so mortally bad about it, why he did not get up and beat a retreat. We passed so close that I learned his reason. A curious writhe and shiver of his limbs made it plain that to retreat was not in his power. He was locked in. The levers and flanges and screws had him immovable in their grip. Heavens! an ordinary dental chair were bad enough, but this one—this that locked the limbs and gagged the mouth, and held a man as in a vice—was altogether too fiendish. Again I was struck by the fact that the man was alone and that none of the paraphernalia of dentistry were about. The dentist was a cool hand indeed to leave his patient thus to his imagination.

"I say! man in a fit," my opposite fellow-passenger broke in. He leaned out of window. "Poor wretch! and nobody with him!"

He resumed his seat. "I don't think it was a fit after all," he said, thoughtfully, "his eyes were conscious."

The same man travelled with me in the evening. As we neared the house we instinctively strained our necks in its direction. Every blind was drawn. It was like a house that had dropped its lids on a secret. My companion made a gesture towards it.

"Dead, I suppose," he said, with a little shudder. "Poor beggar! I hope they found him while he was alive."

I had it on my tongue to tell him my view, but I refrained. After all, he might be right. For surely no man ever looked like that over a tooth.

Next day the blinds were up. The chair was empty. The dentist sat in the garden. I had searched the papers vainly for a case of sudden or mysterious death. Two evenings later the chair was

again occupied. Again a man alone, convulsed and livid, lay with his gagged face turned to the window, his eyeballs starting. I could make out but little of his face for the screw and flange of the gag. But I noticed he had the wild grey hair of the man I had seen in the garden—the man I had taken for the dentist. I reconstructed my views. It was no case of dentistry. The room, after all, was a studio, the man an artist's model. The torture on his face was simulated—excellently well simulated. He was posing for some impressionist picture. Where then was the artist? And where the picture? There was neither easel, nor palette, nor even a mahl-stick. I could see every corner of the room. There was nothing in it but the chair—nobody in it but the man. I had come to the end of my imaginative patience. I would guess no longer.

The next morning I got out at the nearest station. Inquiring my way to the house, I was aware of being an object of interest, if not of suspicion. I congratulated myself. There was something to sift after all.

"You mean Massey's house," a woman answered to my queries. "Ah! poor gentleman! Up the lane and past the Spotted Crocodill, and round by Meakin's forge, and it'll be the first house you come to."

"Why do you say 'poor gentleman'?"

She shut her lips and shook her head. She tapped her forehead. Then she recited off a string of mild invective, and darting across the road, whipped a small son of hers out of the gutter, and applied a palm in forcible and rapid iteration to the side of his face. I am sensitive to discordant sound. I hastened on, pondering how it came about that a woman could have in the same moment sympathy and to spare over a strange "poor gentleman," and not a grain of commiseration for a lonesome little chap of her own with a taste for mud-pies. I gained the Spotted Crocodile and passed Meakin's forge, where a man, who might have been Meakin, was shoeing a horse, and so to the house. Its front was pretentious but commonplace. One would not have looked twice at it. The rambling farm-house forming the back was faced by the most ordinary of villas, a villa of a conventionality of aspect which to me is always nauseating. Every blind was drawn to an equal

depth down every window. Such windows as were open were lifted to an equal height. The muslin curtains were immaculate and stretched on burnished rods. The steps and flags before the door were chalked as though they had something to conceal. The knocker was polished till its lustre stabbed the eyes. Altogether I was unfavourably impressed. The house was like a man whose teeth are too white. I mentally rubbed my hands. I love a house with so smiling a front. It rarely fails me. The door was opened by a sly-looking dapper housemaid. I had an impression of her levelling those blinds and polishing that knocker the while she laughed in her sleeve.

"Mr. Massey in?" I inquired.

"No sir, he's just gone out," she answered glibly; "if you was to walk up the road and turn to the right you'd be sure and catch him up," she added pointing her hand.

I know a lie when it is told me. I knew it then. I stepped over the spotless threshold into the immaculate hall.

"I will wait," I said.

Had I been less quick she would have shut the door on me. She stood watching me with eyes like knitting-needles.

"Master's not very well, and doesn't see anybody," she said, a little abashed.

"He will see me," I said confidently.

There is no situation in the world which cannot be carried by confidence. After a moment's hesitation she crossed the hall and flung a door open. I entered an old-fashioned parlour. I gave her my card. She seemed impressed.

"I will tell Mr. Smithson, my lord," she said, civilly.

"Now who the dickens is Smithson?" I wondered.

He was by my elbow while I did so. I had not heard him come, but there he was, a smooth-faced restless-eyed fellow with a chronic smile, and a superfluity of teeth phenomenally white.

"Mr. Massey is not well this morning, my lord," he said, obsequiously. "Can I take any message from your lordship?"

"He is not out then?"

Smithson shrugged his shoulders and displayed his teeth as if to acquit himself of all responsibility in that particular lie.

"He will be sorry to miss you," he said.

"I will call again."

He made another deprecating gesture as if to imply that should I do so my trouble would possibly be unrewarded.

"Your master is a dentist?" I remarked, in the hall.

"Pardon me, my lord, I am not at liberty to talk of my master's affairs," he said, suavely.

Just then a voice shouted hoarsely:

"Smithson, for God's sake let me out. I can't stand it any longer, I shall go mad."

The cry was repeated with groans and panting breath. Smithson's eyes met mine.

"My master requires me," he said, obviously speeding my departure.

"He seems in pain or some extremity. Go to him. I will open the door myself."

But he would not leave me.

"Oh! I am suffocating—suffocating!" the strangled voice expostulated.

Then the door was shut and locked. I caught the next train back to town. I had walked rapidly to the station. Not more than half-an-hour elapsed between my leaving the house by the front door and passing its rear in the train. I looked into the large room. The dentist's chair was occupied, and by the same grey-haired young man. His face was contorted, his eyeballs strained, his hands clutched the chair-arms with the same lividity of spasm.

The solution of the problem suggested itself. Massey was a lunatic, Smithson his keeper. The chair was a contrivance for restraining him in violent moods. The cries I had heard were thus explicable enough. My interest was now engaged. I set inquiries afoot but could learn little of him. Only people shook ominous heads at the mention of Smithson. I sent him a line. I should be in the neighbourhood shortly, and hoped for the pleasure of making his acquaintance. He replied that he would be delighted to see me.

Smithson eyed me with no favour.

"Are your master's violent fits liable to come on at any moment?" I inquired, as he preceded me across the hall. He turned and stared.

"I think it must be some mistake," he answered, "my master is not a lunatic." He still stared at me.

"He said he had not your lordship's acquaintance. You must be mistaking him for somebody else."

"That I will settle with himself," I

said. He still hesitated as if doubtful about admitting me. I pushed on.

"Lord Syfret," he announced to the old-fashioned parlour. The grey-haired young man came forward, stretching out both hands.

"You do me an honour," he said, nervously. Smithson left us. We plunged into conversation. He was a friendly fellow, and seemed flattered by my visit. I apologised for the intrusion. I was a person burdened with leisure and a bit of a busybody. I had remarked his house from the railway. It's quaint appearance had interested me. Had it any story? Might I go into the garden? Might I see his studio?

"My studio?" he questioned, fixing his prominent roving eyes on mine.

"I take the large room with the top-light to be a studio?" He seemed sobered.

"I do not paint," he said. He was a stockbroker, and had spent the greater part of his life in America. He had no friends in England.

"You shall see the room if you wish it," he said, a shade reluctant.

I wished it. As I had gathered from passing glimpses, it was a great bare room with nothing in it but the chair. I observed it surreptitiously. I would not hurt his feelings by being seen to remark it.

It was the most complicated piece of mechanism I had ever chanced upon. It bristled with clamps and devices.

We stood staring about the room. Somehow our eyes turned always on the chair. I could scarcely keep it off my lips.

"You have a pretty view," I said, still staring at it.

At length he broke out, nervously:

"You are looking at the chair?"

I scanned him closely. The mention of it was calculated to excite him. But he was quiet enough. Only his expression sobered, his lips twitched.

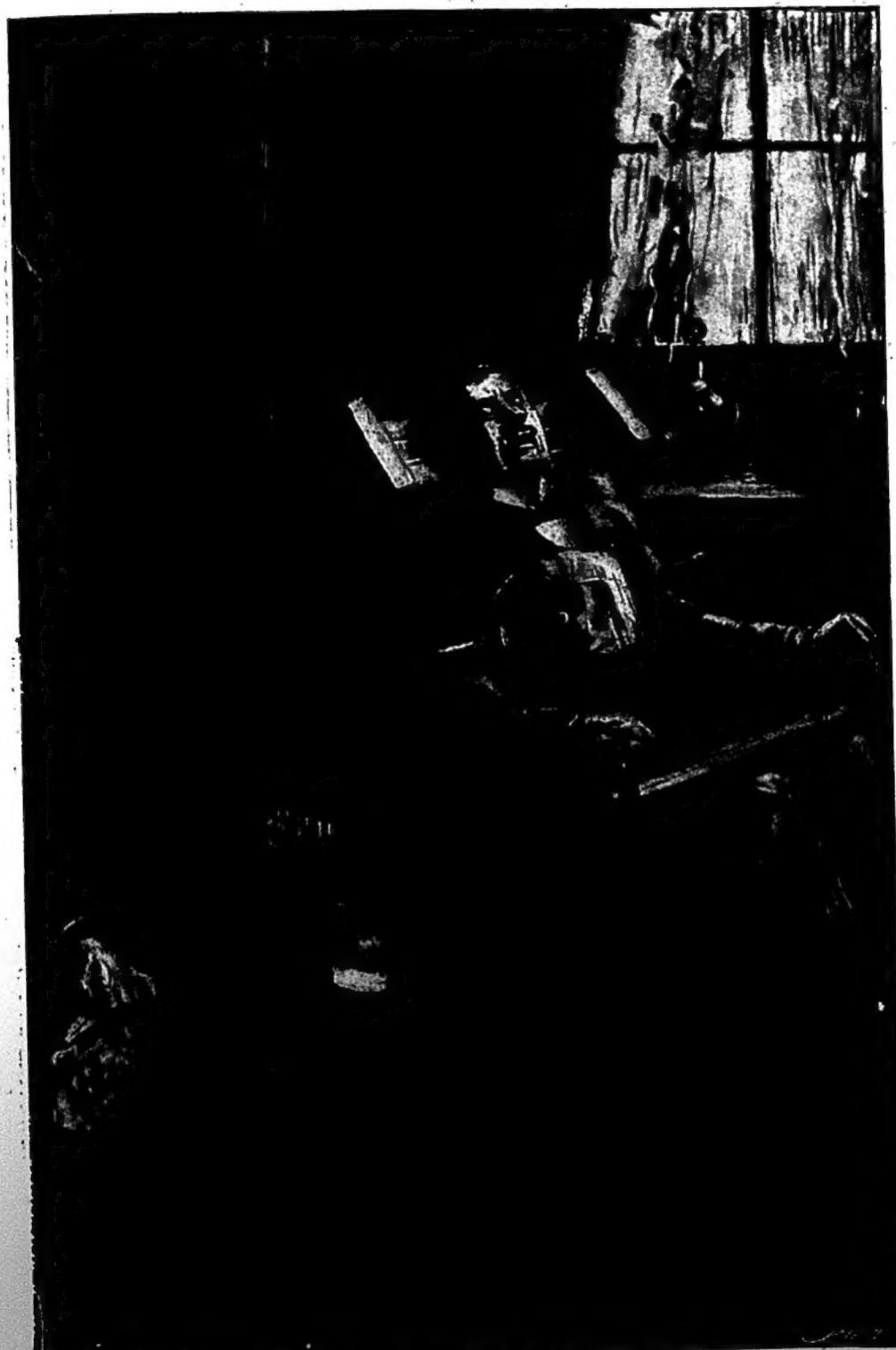
"It looks like a dentist's chair," I said, tritely.

"It is a dentist's chair." He added under his breath: "Don't ask me about it."

"Certainly not, if you do not wish it. Let us go into the garden." But he still stood there.

"You never before saw a chair like it," he asserted, jealously.

A new idea struck me.



"BEHIND ME ALL WAS SILENCE"

"It is an invention of your own?" He turned on me peevishly. "You said you would not ask!"

"Pardon; let us go into the garden."

But he did not move. Suddenly he broke out. "I invent it! No, thank Heaven, it wasn't so bad as that."

He was growing agitated.

"Let us go into the garden," I said a third time.

He stood irresolute. He passed a thin hand over his brow.

"No, it was bad enough," he muttered. "Heaven knows it was bad enough, but it wasn't as bad as that." He looked furtively about the room. "I have never told anybody," he began.

I waited.

After a pause. "That chair nearly cost me my life." From under his faded hair a sweat-drop rolled and, gathering moisture as it travelled, trickled down over his forehead and fell on his hand. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. "It cost me my health and peace of mind," he muttered.

Suddenly he looked me in the face with a wild appeal.

"Do you think a man might go mad brooding over things?"

"I should think a man who recognised the possibility would not be such a fool as to brood over things," I said firmly.

"O, it's so easy to talk," he muttered, staring at the chair. He took a key from his pocket and slipping it into a triangular opening, turned it.

With a whirring click a lever slid down slowly from its place, the seat tilted, the flanges revolved. Then the chair flung wide its arms with the suggestion of a steel embrace. I thought of a certain metal "maiden" of Inquisition fame. He motioned me toward it.

"Will you try it?"

I declined with thanks—to his surprise. He stepped on to the platform with alacrity and seated himself.

"Lock it," he said, handing me the key.

I slipped it into the aperture and turned it.

Immediately the former process was reversed. The seat levelled, a series of plates jointed like armour closed down over his extended arms, a collar of iron gripped his throat, a steel thorax shut its two halves across his chest. He smiled me a pale smile from out of a visor of iron.

"Isn't it marvellous?" he questioned.

"Devilish," I replied.

"I cannot move hand nor foot. You might cut my throat and I couldn't lift a finger."

Suddenly his expression changed. His eyeballs started. His skin took on a greenish pallor. Though he could not stir, his hands purpled under the tension of his muscles. He was the man I had seen from the train.

"For Heaven's sake let me out!" he gasped. "For Heaven's sake!"

I turned the lock. The chair flung wide its iron chest and arms. With a bound he leapt out vaulting to the other end of the room. If ever joy painted itself on a poor wretch's face, it painted itself on his. He shook me by the hand.

"Thank God!" he gasped, "It took me too soon. I must be losing my nerve."

"To tell the truth," I said bluntly, "you are a fool to play with your nerve in such a fashion."

In the garden he explained.

"The chair belonged to a friend of mine. Indeed, it was his invention. He spent years perfecting it. He was an American dentist, not very well off—an ingenious chap. He invented it so that he should not need an assistant in operating. The patient was absolutely controlled, and the operator unhindered. It was in America it all happened. He found it a great assistance to him, and was doing well. Indeed, he was doing too well. He was doing the work of three men.

Having been awake all night with toothache I took my way to him one morning.

"He had just moved into a new house. He was on the point of marrying a girl he had been fond of for years and was looking forward to happiness.

"As I went up the steps that morning I was surprised to meet him coming down. He had a travelling-bag in his hand.

"Hallo!" he said.

"Hallo!" I answered.

"I'm just off to Newport for a week. The heat has been so terrific I'm dead beat. Doctor says another few days without a rest might do for me."

"A man with a toothache is no Christian. 'For goodness sake,' I begged him, 'turn back and relieve me of this aching fiend.'

"He was a good-hearted chap. 'Why,

'certainly,' he agreed, 'I can do it and yet catch my train. I'm well on time.'

"He unlocked the door, and we went in.

"It's homicidal weather," he said, 'and as I was going, I've given the servants a week off. There's not a soul in the place!'

"Chair answering?" I asked, as I took my seat in it.

"He flushed proudly. 'I've taken out a patent. I showed it at the Dental Society's meeting last night. Congratulate me on a fortune!'

"He turned the key. For the first time I was locked in. It isn't altogether a pleasant sensation." "What do you want, Smithson? No, I did not call, but you can bring some wine."

He waited for the wine with curious, absent eyes. Then he went on with his story.

"Well, I was locked in. I lay back as if I had been in a vice, my mouth was gagged open. I could not move a muscle. Would you not like to test it?"

I shook my head.

"You will never altogether realise what I felt.

"I heard him cross the room behind me. I heard him coming back. You know the sensation? I was aware he was trying to hide a demon of a forceps in the palm of his hand. I braced myself for the wrench. I wondered vindictively why teeth had not been otherwise planned.

"Just as I thought he was on me I heard a stumble, a thud, a groan. I thought he had tripped.

"Hurt yourself, old boy?" I asked.

"There was no answer. Only a deep, catchy breathing. 'He must have hurt himself a good deal,' I thought.

"The breathing grew quieter. I repeated the question. Instinctively I tried to turn — an impossibility, of course.

"'I hope you are not badly hurt,' I said, 'I can't go to you.'

"Still there was no answer. He must have seriously hurt himself. I mentally confounded the chair which held my head immovable. Then I spoke to him again. With no result. There was nothing to believe but that he had fainted. The breathing was now so quiet as to be almost inaudible. The necessity of freeing myself, so that I might go to his assistance, wrestled so

urgently with my inability to do so that I was on the verge of strangulation. With an effort I controlled myself. There was nothing to be done. Of the two, though he were insensible, I was by far the more powerless, for I was dependent on his aid before I could lift a finger. There was nothing for me to do but to wait. I waited. With how little patience you may guess. A clock in the room struck ten. It had 'tinged' the half hour after nine as I entered. I fairly groaned with vexation. Poor Newby would lose his train. Why the deuce had I not let him take himself off? My tooth could have waited, or have found another extractor. Into what a business my impatience had plunged us! I grew serious as to how far he might have injured himself. Possibly even when he should recover consciousness he might not be in a condition to release me. He might in falling have broken, or at least have dislocated, a bone. A hundred harassing probabilities occurred to me. I fumed and fretted, straining my eyeballs vainly to this and that side trying to catch a glimpse of him. I could still hear him faintly breathing. The stretched muscles of my gagged jaws began to throb and ache. I tried to call, but the throat has little power when the mouth is stretched, and the gag choked my voice. Moreover, I remembered that the house was empty. He had sent his servants away for a week. There was nothing for it but to wait. I waited. The clock on the table struck eleven. Half-a-dozen clocks outside reiterated the fact. It was eleven o'clock—eleven o'clock on a summer's morning. The world on the other side of the window was astir and busy. I could hear men's steps beat the pavement. They seemed to be leaving us behind. The rattle of cabs and clack of horse's hoofs mocked the dull stillness of the room. I stretched my ears for sounds of my poor friend's returning consciousness. I even dreaded that return lest it should prove him incapacitated. In that case what in the wide world were we to do? I put the thought away. Heaven knew I needed my wits to keep me from bruising myself against my iron bonds. I found myself cursing the evil genius of Newby's ingenuity with more intensity than reason. The clocks struck twelve. By this time the breath-sounds were

scarcely perceptible. Heavens! Was he dying? Was he dying for the need of help? Dying with a strong, whole man, and that man his good friend, within a yard of him? For a whole half-hour I shouted at the top of my voice; shouted, indeed, till my voice was a mere rough thread in my rasped throat. The sounds of life outside went on with a brisk indifference that seemed brutality. Was there no power, no telepathy of human sympathy, that should communicate to some of those outside that within the room whose window stared at them, a man lay, it might be dying, while another, gagged and bound, strove with unspeakable torment to go to his aid. The hours wore on. The horrible dread of listening for them, and learning from their iron tongue that another sixty minutes had closed down like an inexorable door between the man I had been in the morning—the free man, with no worse trouble than an aching tooth—and the bound, helpless wretch I then was, became intolerable. Sound, thought, feeling, merged in confusion. My brain throbbed in my ears, my blood beat in my veins; I could hear it like waves on shingle. Out of the confusion I distinguished nothing. The steps outside, the faint breathing, the striking clocks—all were lost in a curious hustling dread. I must have fainted. I awoke to a sense of surprise. But the torture of my constrained position left me but shortly in doubt. My lips and cheeks seemed cracking under the stretch of the gag. Like some swollen horror my dry tongue filled my mouth. Behind me all was—silence."

He stopped and looked me wildly in the face.

"Do you think I shall forget it if I live to be eighty?—the horror of that moment when I listened for his breathing, for his movement, and heard—nothing!"

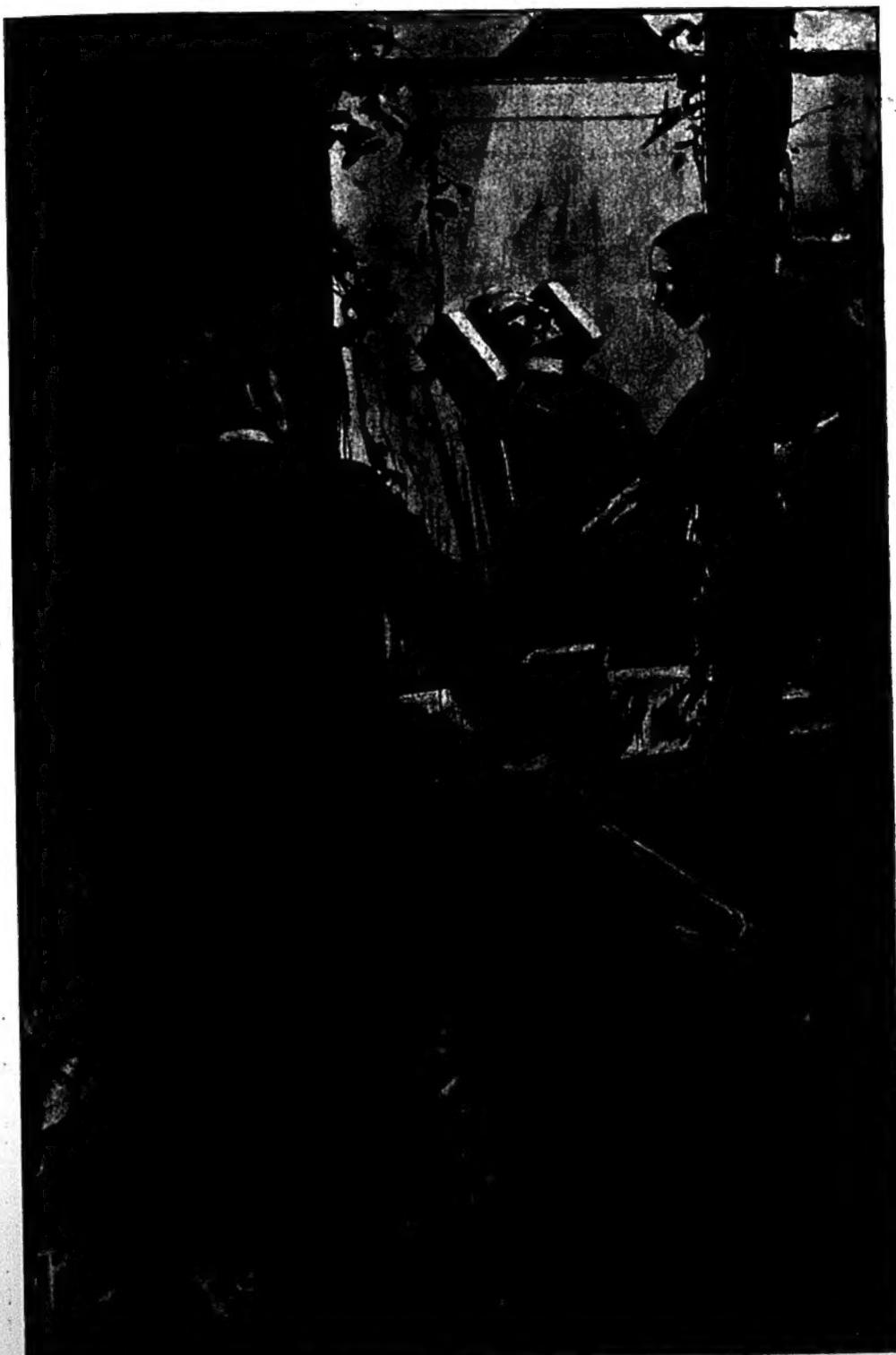
He sat panting like one spent with running. I poured out and passed him a glass of wine.

"The sun was levelling. It shot in presently beneath the blind and stabbed my starting eyes. Its hot glare turned me sick. It seemed to be searching the room with a lurid inquisitiveness. Presently I thought it halted, resting stationary, with a dull astonishment, on something I could not see, something

behind me that I could not see, but felt with a horrible intensity. Again I shouted as well as my stiff jaws and swollen tongue would let me. I sent cry after cry into space. My voice was strange and hoarse. It put me in a panic to hear another man's voice shouting out of my throat. But nobody heard. There was nobody to hear. Each man tramped over the pavement, bent on his own pursuits. Just while the sun illumined us, had anybody turned his head, he might have seen me through the wire blind—a man in torture.

"But nobody turned his head. Night came, and with it a measure of coolness. The dusk was grateful to my nerves and eyes; and I had a hope that when the passers-by had taken their clattering footsteps home, I might, by Heaven's kindness, make myself heard. But by the time the silence came I had no voice to be heard. It was as much as I could do to draw my breath between my swollen lips. The night silence brought out that other silence into which I listened for his breathing. If I could only have caught a glimpse of him! If I could only have seen the reality rather than the horrible phantasies my mind began to conjure! I pictured him bruised and contorted, I pictured him weltering in blood; I pictured him lying, kneeling, sitting. I pictured him conscious and cunning, standing above me with a whetted knife. It came to me that he was not really dead, but had gone suddenly mad. I could feel him crouching close behind me waiting for the moment. I could hear him steal about the room. I strained my eyes to see his head come suddenly over my shoulder, his eyes glare into mine. I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. It was a trap. It was the devilry of one with homicidal mania. This was the motive of his horrible chair. This was the object of his years of planning. How many men before me had been his victims? The room seemed peopled with them.

They stared from every corner. They laughed with ghastly laughter at another dupe. I wondered if he would kill me outright, or leave me to die in the chair. I called to him to cut my throat and end it. I thought he chuckled. Again I was sure he was dead. And I was afraid of him—afraid of the grisly thing that lay so still behind me. I had rather



"ARE YOU GOING TO SIGN, YOU FOOL?"

he lived and stood by me with whetted knife. He was more fearsome dead and girt with the horrors of violent death than he was fearsome as an assassin, breathing, intelligible, and murderous.

"He seemed to me to lie there lifting his clammy hands with the continuous impotent movement of corpse hands stirred by a tide. I could hear them beat the carpet, rising and falling with rhythmic thud. Then I went back to the beginning. He was not dead, but something had fallen on his face—something that his faintness prevented him from removing, yet left him conscious enough to know that he was suffocating. I pictured the long, full breath he would draw if I but turned and freed him. I drew that breath for him, instinctively. I suffocated. I struggled in my bonds to turn and free him. I rasped my wrists and limbs till they were raw, trying to turn and free him. Then it was nose-bleeding—he had suffered sometimes from nose-bleeding. He was dying of that, dying for need of the simplest aid. The room swam red. It streamed before me in crimson jets. Could any man's body hold so much blood? It rose and rose and lapped my face. Again I heard him lift his body dully in the dark. He came dragging himself round to look me in the face. His chill hands swept my forehead, importuning me. My hair listed on my scalp. Why had I come between him and life? Why had I robbed him of happiness? His spirit moaned about the room. I prayed for his knife at my throat. Only let it end; let it end. A thousand times he crossed the room as I had heard him cross it, to return with feet that at first were light, then dragged, then halted and passed into that sickening thud. He seemed to try so hard to reach me, returning again and again and starting afresh for my chair. A thousand times I held my breath, hoping he had reached me, when he tripped and fell—fell with that sickening thud.

"His children came, the children that might have been his, and looked at me with phantom eyes. I could not turn my face from them. Anything that liked to come might come and stare at me; I could not turn my face."

I interrupted him. The man was possessed. The veil between him and madness was stretched to cracking point,

"How did it end?" I asked.

He started and stared.

"How did it end?" I insisted.

"Let me tell it," he said peevishly.

After some moments of childish petulance during which he weakly whimpered. "It went on three whole days and nights," he said, moistening his lips. "In lucid moments I knew he was dead. The odour of death and dissolution in that hot terrible room became intolerable. I was without food or drink. I could not sleep. I could not call. I could only think and feel—such thoughts, such feelings! I only knew of that which lay and decomposed behind my chair. I am only thirty. But do you wonder my hair is grey? I had intervals of unconsciousness thank Heaven, prostration and delirium. Hunger and faintness do that for a man.

"In the small hours of the fourth morning, while it was still dark, a noise at the window aroused me. I wonder I was still alive; but men take a good deal of killing. At first I thought it fancy. I had had so many fancies. But I heard a sound as of bitten glass, then the hasp of the window flew back, the sash was raised. Between my swollen lids there came a glare of light. Black things flitted on the ceiling. I heard whispering. I thought they had come to kill me. The scalding water of my tears ran down my face as I thanked God they had come to kill me. It seemed hours they were stealing about the room, with hoarse whispers. I could only see their shadows on the ceiling. How many there were I could not say, but a hundred heads at least passed blackly over the ceiling.

"Then my tears ran cold. They were only shadows. It was only another phantasy. My imagination was at play again. I hurled wild imprecations at the shadow heads. 'You are not, you are not!' I cried to them out of my voiceless throat. 'You do not deceive me, I know you are not.' Then a horrible face—a face half black, half white, leaned over me. A hoarse cry broke in my ears. Soon two horrible piebald faces leaned over me. A second cry came, a third, and they stood panting there. One touched the thing beside me with his foot.

"'Both dead,' he muttered, as one baulked of prey. I mustered all my strength and moaned. They made for

the door. My despair and desolation nerved me.

"For God's sake, cut my throat!" I groaned. I heard them turn back. Then I knew nothing more till I found myself in hospital. I had been rescued by burglars, and three weeks mad.

"When I was well I knew the truth. Newby had died that morning of an apoplectic seizure. Nothing could have saved him, the doctors said."

"Why did you not have the chair destroyed?"

He turned on me angrily.

"It is my only comfort. I recompense myself for past misery by multiplying the joys of release. I have a man, a faithful fellow — the only other person besides yourself who knows my story. I get him to lock me in, leave me, and then, when I have worked myself to the limits of terror, believing myself deserted, he lets me out. The joy of release is the only joy left to me. I need and allow myself no other indulgence."

I had been making up my mind.

"Are you a good sailor?"

He was. By superhuman eloquence I persuaded him to consent to a voyage in my yacht. I was starting next morning. I am no philanthropist, but a man's sanity is worth saving. An hour after I had left the house I went back to it. There was a look on Smithson's face when told to pack that had remained with me. I went by the side-door round into the garden. As the annex came into view Smithson appeared at the window. He was smiling unpleasantly. The room was lighted. Massey was in the chair. (Was the fool worth saving?) Smithson turned presently into the room. I made my way to the window, and stood in the shade of a shrub.

"I'll have the gag," I heard my king of idiots say. "I want to get up a real good sensation. It's the last I'll have for a time."

I heard the click of metal.

"Now go," Massey mumbled, "and keep me a long time to-night."

But Smithson went not. On the

contrary, he turned and flicked his victim in the face.

"Not before we've arranged a bit of business," he said, jauntily. "Now then, young man I've put up with you a good many months, and you're a-going to send me adrift are you?"

Inarticulate dissent from Massey.

"O! yes you are. Syfret's got hold of you. You've passed out of my hands. There'll be no more chair and



"FALLING FOUL OF THE CHAIR"

gags for you I can see plainly. But I am going to be paid for all my trouble. Fifty pound a year hasn't paid me, I can tell you. I shall loose your right hand for you to sign this. If you don't — well, you've been locked in here before, and you know how you like it. There'll be no one in the house. Bess and me was married this morning, and we're off to America by the night boat. If you was to refuse to sign, I should lock all the doors and windows and put

up the shutters. I've told everybodyt we're all going a voyage. And you need not look for burglars this time. There's nothing in the house to take, Bess and me has seen to that. Now then, are you going to sign, you fool?"

Massey managed to query through the gag ; " How much ? "

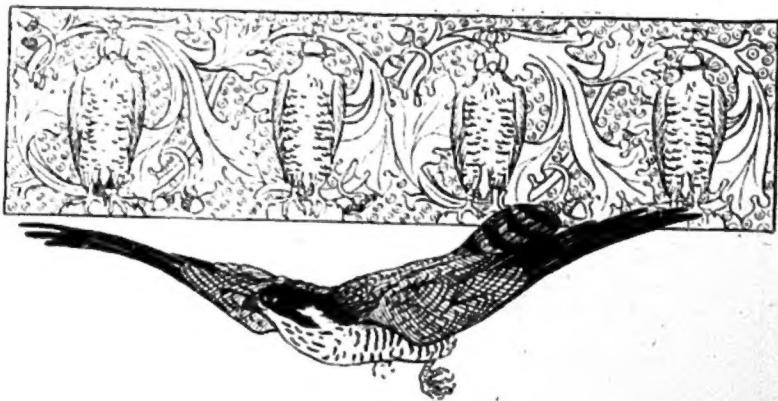
" Only five thou'. You could spare ten easy. But I'll do with five."

Massey groaned. But, of course, he relented. What else could he have done?

I went in behind Smithson while he was busy with the lock. I set my knee against his back and threw him. He fell heavily, striking his head. He was safe for some minutes. In those minutes I released Massey. Together we lifted the rascal into the chair and turned the key. It was a capital contrivance for extracting truth. We discovered the whereabouts of the plate and other

things Mr. and Mrs. Smithson had appropriated. With some of them she was waiting in the kitchen. Then I let him out and bundled him into the road. When I went back, I discovered Massey with a pitchfork falling manfully foul of the chair. He raised his weapon high. He brought it down with violent invective. He banged and battered till the clamps and flanges were a homogeneous mass ; he ripped its velvet cushionings, and broke its arms and legs. With a fell and final swoop he hurled himself upon it and smote the gag with such a blow that it bounded across the room, and breaking a pane of glass, whirled into the garden.

Any body seeing him would have taken him for nothing less than a homicidal maniac. Yet this murderous attack of his was about the first symptom of sanity I had remarked in him.



The "Ludgate" Prize Competitions.

M R. H. F. RICKETTS, Santa Fé, Argentina, receives the photographic medal for a picture with a history which he tells as follows: "I am afraid the photograph I send you will be too late for the competition, but it will cost me a forty mile gallop to catch the mail to-morrow, and 'taking one consideration with another' it would be kind of you to give me a few days' grace. The picture represents a near squeak a friend and I had of getting—let us say—singed. I had taken my hand-camera tied to my saddle for the purpose of obtaining a snapshot of a fire on the prairie within a mile of my ranch, and my friend had accompanied me. We were riding on one side of the fire admiring the spectacle at a respectable distance, when, without warning, the wind which had been driving hard from the north, went round to the south, and blew a regular 'Pampero,' and dashed the flames towards us. Never had I imagined that fire could travel at such a speed: it simply flew over the ground.

The roar of the water exploding in the rushes was terrific. Of course we galloped for our lives—and such galloping! On an ordinary occasion a trot would be too fast for the prairie, where the vegetation rose above our horses' heads. A fall would have meant—well, that we would have come in a bad second; but neither horse stumbled even. Luckily there was no smoke, or hardly any, but there was a great wall of flame and the heat became well-nigh unbearable. For an hour we rode like mad, and the grass began to get shorter, till we emerged at last into what might almost be called an open camp. Then I thought of a photograph; and, loosening my reins, I was ahead of my chum in a second. Taking my camera from its case, I 'snapped'—and the result is what you see. It conveys little idea of the reality, but to me it brings back vividly one of the warmest gallops I have ever experienced." The Editor of the *Ludgate* is certain none will grudge his or her fellow-reader, Mr. Ricketts, the medal forwarded to him.



FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE: MEDAL
By H. F. RICKETTS, *Sante Fé, Argentina*